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Jane Burr's  
CITY DUST



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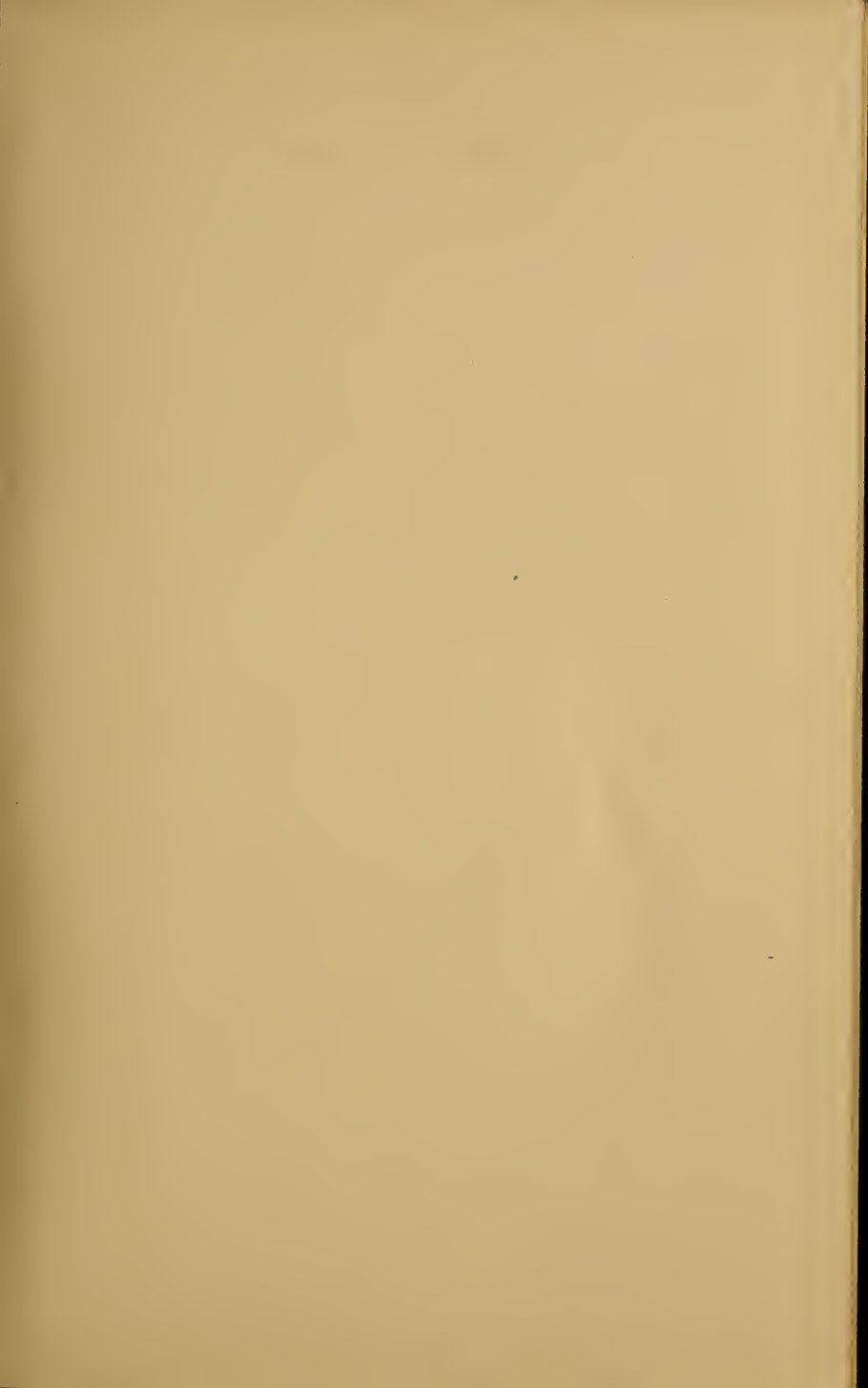
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# CITY DUST



# CITY DUST

BY

JANE BURR

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TO  
MY MOTHER  
A TRIBUTE

SEP -1 1917

## CITY DUST

### SPRING

I piped when I opened my eyes to the day,  
And the inner *me* murmured, "How can you be gay?  
You've fluttered too high and you've broken your wing—  
There's never a reason why cripples should sing!"  
"But it's Spring!" I said, "It's Spring!"  
And I called it a garden—my shabby old room  
And I danced to the wall-paper roses in bloom;  
And the inner *me* murmured, "What does it all bring!  
You're a sparrow, a cricket, a silly young thing!"  
I answered, "I know, but it's Spring!"



## CITY DUST

### THE GOLDEN SEASON

He came to me with a light on his brow,  
And he sang of Mexico;—  
And he said "There'll be a peach of a row  
Oh mother I want to go—  
Oh mother you'll let me go!"

Then back through more than a dozen years  
Came the ghost of an April day,  
And the tramp—tramp—tramp—and the ringing cheers—  
And the fifes that tried to be gay—  
And the drums that tried to be gay!

And I lifted my budding boy again  
And I felt him tremble and thrill  
At the sight of our homing—shattered men—  
Our men that were pale and ill—  
Our men that would always be ill!

And I showed him the gap in every line—  
For the dead don't march along;  
My blood was ice but his own ran wine,  
And he sang them a soldier's song—  
He shouted a soldier's song!

His faith was new so my lips were dumb  
And I hid in the dark to cry,  
While his heart beat time to the fife and drum!  
His hope was too young to die—  
It's still too young to die!

### IT RESTS WITH YOU

The puny self we think so great  
Is just a bubble blown by fate—  
And yours may be of rain-bowed hope,  
Or yours may be—well—merely soap!

## CITY DUST

### WONDERFUL HANDS

The hands of a wonderful woman, you say—  
Sculped by a god from the heart of his clay?  
Slender and white,  
Waxen, unstained,  
Royally veined,  
Sheened with the warmth of a purified light?

The hands of a wonderful woman, I say—  
Plunged into shape from the leavings of clay:  
Muscles and bone,  
Brutally scarred,  
Knotted and tarred,  
Stout to the feel as a mallet of stone!

Scars that she won when she fought for her seed,  
Muscle she earned when she slaved for their need,  
Smut for her pay,—  
Wrinkled and notched,  
Toughened and blotched,  
The hands of a wonderful woman, I say!

### THE TENEMENT'S TITHE

Little white banners of roses and crepe  
Are wilting at tenement doors;  
Little white mothers are staring agape  
And tip-toing tenement floors.—

And off by the rim of the green, creaming sea  
With millions of acres to spare,  
The babes of the RULERS are frolicking free  
In the cool of God's spindrift and air.

## CITY DUST

### MY HUSBAND'S FOLKS

Have you ever tried to warm your soul and rub your hands  
to life,

When the breath of people froze you through and through—  
Have you ever closed your eyes—a maid, and open them a  
wife

In a strange, uncharted world you thought you knew?  
Have you waited for the welcome of your hungry little being  
Till you felt the angry moment when the brain within you  
smokes,

Have they bidden you good-morning with their marble eyes  
unseeing?—

Oh, I'll make them love me yet—my husband's folks!

Have they found you dull and stupid when they hoped you  
would be wise,

Have they told you when to weep and when to smile,  
Have they thought your hair unlovely, have they criticised  
your eyes,

Have they thought you just a bit home-made in style?  
Have they chatted personalities and never once explained  
them,

Have they giggled over subtle family jokes,  
Have they forced their set opinions on your soul and then  
ingrained them?

Oh, I'll make them love me yet—my husband's folks!

If my hair were of the sunshine and my eyes were of the  
stars,

If my soul were soft as any breeze that blows,  
If my coffers glinted goldener and fuller than the Czar's  
If my flesh were of the jasmine and the rose—

I would still be something alien that one takes no slightest  
care of,

Something dashed against the family-polished-spokes!  
When that son of mine goes wooing, I'll have breakers to be-  
ware of,

And I'll make them love me yet—my husband's folks!

## CITY DUST

### THE HOLOCAUST

I built an altar in the wood  
And knelt and poured into the flame,  
The bitter lees of loverhood—  
A dream . . . a tenderness . . . a name.  
“Leap flame! Curl smoke! Blow wind and free  
The crumbling ash of my regret!  
Let him take thought no more of me—  
If so he please—I too forget!”

Wind blew, smoke curled, the fanned fire leapt;  
Against my eyes, the world went dim,  
And homeward through the dark I crept,  
Without a memory of him.

But when the Spring had ruffled through;  
When lovers in the bracken chirred;  
When leaf and bud were summer-new—  
Old struggling tendernesses stirred.

I wandered back where ivies twine,  
And there I found still sweet with myrrhs,  
The altar mellowed to a shrine—  
A rose and I the worshippers.

### THE MARROW OF LIFE

The country stillness soothes me—for a night, perhaps a day—  
And then the city calls me and I must be on my way,  
To the reeking, cluttered back-streets and the sickly city  
sights,  
And the grime and stain and terror of evil city nights.  
Oh you may throb to nature and nature's roundelay,  
But mine are city pulses that beat with city fray;  
And I'd rather salve one sorrow and dry one human's tears  
Than pick a million daisies for a million, million years!

## CITY DUST

### THE EXILE

There's a dismal sort of comfort in the miles that lie between  
All this melancholy Northland and my sunny Southern Green,  
For the ships can sail me bravely to the palm entangled shore,  
But there are no ships to sail me down the Spring-tide any  
more,

Where the nights were meant for play time and the mornings  
meant for rest,

And every day was holiday and Christmas day was best;  
Where old stockin'-footed Tilly built a fire upon the grate  
And whispered near my bed-side like an ebon-tinted fate—  
"Chris'mas gif' Miss Rosie!"

And it wasn't Christmas morning like the Christmasses you  
know,  
With the tinkle of the sleigh-bells and the swirling drifts of  
snow:

Just a sunny lazy Christmas full of languerous desire—  
And the darkies roastin' bacon on the forks before the fire,  
And the pop-corn in the popper and the kettle on the crane,  
And the 'taters in the ashes and the family home again,  
And the little shoat and cracklin' turk the best that could be  
found,

And the darkies grinnin' at the tree and whisperin' around—  
"Chris'mas gif' Miss Rosie!"

I am glad the lazy Southland cannot claim me any more,  
With my coffee and my little satin slippers on the floor;  
For Northern living's braver and I meet the midnight hush  
With a thrill, for I am part of all the power and the rush!  
But I hate your Christmas mornings and your bitter Christ-  
mas cold

And I shut my eyes and doze again to keep from feelin' old,  
For I want to go back home and stay the whole long Christ-  
mas day—

Just to lazy with the family and to hear the darkies say—  
"Chris'mas gif' Miss Rosie!"

## CITY DUST

### THE DEBUTANTE

Oh, beat your drums and ring your brass,  
You wonder-world of sham,  
I've found out in my looking-glass,  
How beautiful I am!  
So what's the use of deeper things—  
Of thinking wrong or right—  
For I have found a songbird's wings,  
And know a songbird's flight!  
Go nature! Blow your breezes high  
And fan my cheeks to rose,  
And light the sparkle in my eye  
To please an hundred beaux;  
For I have beaux to trample down  
And beaux to love and hate—  
I've courtiers all about the town  
From which to choose my mate!  
So sing me in and sing me out,  
The earth's a lovely place,  
And all the loveliness about  
Is mirrored in my face.  
Oh, beat your drums and ring your brass,  
You wonder-world of sham,  
I've found out in my looking glass  
How beautiful I am!

### ALL THE SAME LOVE

She came with her red, red, lips aglow—  
With her joy and her passionate leaven,  
And lifted you up when you would or no  
To the tip-top skies of heaven!  
She went with her thin old lips gone gray,  
And none of you ever missed her—  
And she loves her poor in a sacreder way—  
The faded old charity sister.

## CITY DUST

### THE FOUNDLING BABY

They gave him to me!  
They gave him to me for the asking!  
They gave him to me for nothing!  
They gave him to me—a baby—  
A whole, round, God-made baby—  
With big brown eyes—  
Just brown, brown, brown down into the depths of all his  
secrets.  
And his forehead was wrinkled with thought  
Of which way his mother had gone,  
And of where lay his dead father,  
And of whether they thirsted for him, sometime,  
As he thirsted for them all time—  
The brown-eyed baby!

He still remembered his mother's breast;  
I held him warm against my own;  
I accepted him;  
I crushed him to me, but he accepted nobody.  
He pushed himself back, squirming like an indifferent kitten!

I made no fragile lacy fluffs for him to wear—  
I was too busy loving him and learning him.

And then one day he was still and his lips were pale  
And they pressed that white ether mask over his face  
And sent him into a little death.  
And when he opened his wavering eyes,  
Those pale lips that had never made a real word  
And the little pink velvet tongue  
Moved unevenly and cried, "Ma-ma!"  
And I kissed him and he wanted to be kissed.  
And they told me to leave him with strangers,

## CITY DUST

But I would not—for I alone, except for the lost mother,  
Knew all his little ceremonies.

I gave him a silver spoon in his left fist  
And the corner of a woolen blanket in his right fist,  
And he tickled his chin and went to sleep—  
For I alone, except for the lost mother,  
Knew all his little ceremonies.

And when he came back, well again,  
He began to walk—queer, unsteady, forward, comical,  
Racing disjointedly against his wish and thumping to the  
floor;

Picking his little self up without crying  
And racing disjointedly again,  
Tangling himself up in the rugs—  
Queer, unsteady, forward, comical.

One glorious day he rushed forward to me.  
His arms outstretched,  
And smacked his lips against my hand,  
And against my dress,  
And against my knee,  
And against any part of me that he could reach,  
And against all the air about me  
Till the whole wide world was filled with smacking baby  
kisses—  
The little kissing birdie!  
Unending realms of gratitude!  
My baby had accepted me!

## METTLE

The quick little beat of the gay little heart,  
The struggle to love and the struggle to part,  
The proud little smile and the brave little song—  
When heaven's a guess and the world is all wrong!

## CITY DUST

### WHAT FOOLS YE BE!

You would have your babes magicians, you would have them  
dukes and kings,

You would have them snatch the stars from out the sky,  
You would have them sculp and scribble, you would give  
them victor's wings

You would have them gulp the earth before they die!

And the men who live by magic cannot still their stifling pain,

And the men who search the sky are bleak and pale,

And the sculptors and the scribblers and the men who live by  
gain

Are the souls who think they conquer—but they fail!

I would have my babies sing and dance to timbrel and to fife,

I would have them laugh and find the journey gay,

I would have them cherry-lipped and apple-cheeked and  
thrilled with life,

I would have them with their heels upon the clay!

### MAGIC

So stealthily the winter came,

I did not see the brown leaves fall—

I did not feel the Autumn flame

Nor hear the robin's farewell call!

Somehow, someway, I should have known

How dizzily the seasons flew,

For now the world is blizzard blown

And all the harvesting is through!

So stealthily my summer crept—

So swift my youthfulness was spun—

Now all my world is blizzard swept—

And oh, the slender harvest done!

## CITY DUST

### THE BASKET LINE

They swayed in a zigzag, shivering file  
And they stamped their stiffened feet,  
And always there spread the ghost of a smile  
As the line crawled up the street;  
And one fought mad for his narrow place,  
And one groped blind and dumb,  
And one was gay on the whole long way,  
And one had a soul gone numb.

And one had eyes like a starless night,  
And lips of a jade-green-hue,  
And skin that was stretched so yellow and tight  
That the skeleton gibbered through;  
And some were warm with a Christmas hope,  
And some were chilled with fears,  
And some had known gaps, between meals perhaps,  
But the most had been starved for years.

And some of them thought it was jolly fine—  
Like playing a winning game,  
And some went redder than red, red wine  
And spilt their tears of shame;  
And warped little lads came mumbling up  
With a "Sir, if youz don't care—  
My Pa is dead and my Ma she said  
That I was to bring our share."

And they thought they came for a chunk of meat  
And a pound of whitest rice,  
And a jar of jam and a frosted sweet,  
And a pudding done with spice;  
But they didn't ache for that loaf of bread,  
Nor that bone nor that bag of meal—  
They shivered along, three thousand strong—  
For their share of the Christmas feel!

## CITY DUST

### THE LUNGER ON THE ROOF

I feel so light—so happy and light—up here in the dancin'  
sun—

As though the jobs in the world below me are all checked up  
and done;

And it seems to me that dreamin' a bit, makes me long for  
dreamin' more,

For I never in all my life had the chance for sittin' and dream-  
in' before.

I guess five years was a little young, for peddlin' the daily  
sheet,

But there wasn't no kid that was twice my size with a better  
payin' beat;

And once I lived like a loafer, too—for a whole long summer  
day,

On the warm, brown sands of Coney, asleep in the ticklin'  
spray.

But a feller can't idle his life away with the world so full of  
men,

So I got me a job at braidin' skirts when I wasn't no more'n  
ten;

My fingers is somewhat shy on nails and my thumb is queer,  
I'm afraid,

But there ain't no time for pettin' your hooks when you're  
learnin' the sweat-shop-trade!

When ours was comin' my woman and me just thrashed the  
whole thing out,

And we voted for sleep and play and air and none o' your  
paper route;

I used to feel that pull in my chest when I bent on my low-  
backed stool

But I said, "Old man you keep that mum, till the four's  
through grammar school."

## CITY DUST

I'm thinner than that poor lad that slept over there by the south-side wall;

But I can't be goin' to die like him, for I don't feel sick at all;  
I just feel happy and kinder gay, like plannin' an awful lot—  
But I'm drowsin' away so much of late and I wake and it's all forgot.

I guess it's a sort of makin' up for the time I didn't sleep,  
And a holidayin' the whole week round for the Sundays I didn't keep;

When I am well I'm goin' to get me an open stand somewhere—

The doctor says that's what I need—the doc—tor—says—fresh—air.

I'm dozin' again—it makes me forget and I wanted so much to tell—

When I get well—I'm goin' to—goin' to—goin'—when I get—we—l——

### A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

Together we went laughing down the crowded pleasure ways  
And nothing ever mattered but the beauty of the days;

We ate when we were hungry and we slept when we were worn,  
We mended up our garments when they showed where they were torn;

We never thought of money till our shabby pockets yawned—  
Then we suffered or we labored or we borrowed or we pawned.

But now we are crooning the old lullabies

And kissing its dimples, its hair and its eyes;

And dozing away with the small chickadees

And rising ahead of the smartest of these.

Together we sit watching through the winter window-pane  
With our fingers knitted closely when the longing comes again;

And once we tried to follow but we found that we were old

And the niche that we deserted had been crowded twenty-fold:

The calm of life is gentle and the calm of life is sweet

But the thrill of life goes marching with the pageant up the street!

## CITY DUST

### THE OLD DEBT

It come on him jest twenty year ago;  
The moon-shine done it—least that's what they say  
But sometimes I get thinkin'—I dunno—  
He'd been a plowin' in the sun all day.  
That night he got to ravin' in his head  
And no one couldn't make out what he said.

And when the fever went, it took his perk  
And left him addled—nothin' fierce nor wild;  
Jest weakly so he couldn't do no work  
And humble like a little whimperin' child;  
I rolled up both my sleeves as women do  
And since that time I've earned the salt for two.

The village folks is always pesterin' me  
To send him to *The Home*—they say it's best:  
But in my heart is things that folks can't see  
The kind of things that never lets you rest.  
He'll never, never go while I can fight—  
I'd hear him cryin' for me in the night.

I weave my carpet rags and put up jell,  
And scrub the *Hotel* floor to Hawketville;  
In Summer time there's veg'tables to sell;  
In Fall I take my apples to the mill.  
I get so tuckered out I nearly drop—  
But mercy on my soul, I never stop.

Last year I sent and got a picture book—  
He loves it so he drags it all about;  
Sometimes he plays he's fishin' in the brook  
And I pretend to pull the fishes out.  
When we was young—I wasn't square to him—  
Alright—don't cry—I'm comin' to you Jim!

## CITY DUST

### THE PRACTICAL VISIONARY

To you, my life's a deadly bore  
Because I've done at least one chore  
When daylight really breaks;  
Because I'm up and building fires  
And thinking of my brood's desires  
Before the first awakes.

You think my body's like a man's  
From milking cows and scraping pans  
And bathing in the streams.  
Ah dear, I wish that you could see  
The inner consciousness of me:—  
A circus tent of dreams!

That shrieked alarm that tore your nerves,  
Brought back at dawn, blue Como's curves  
And tolling cloister bells;  
That hurried meal by candle-light  
Was like one quaint primordial night  
I spent on Scottish Fells.

And when my boys went out to play  
I saw them men—some future day  
Fulfilling sacred wishes.  
Take back your pity—save your sigh  
Think you if suds were real that I  
Could bear to wash these dishes?

### THE ORACLE SPEAKS

God-spilt rain-drops, glint and beat  
Down upon the granite street!  
Ribbioned, sunlit, chrystal flood:  
Know your end is gutter mud!

## CITY DUST

Love, you joyous splendid thing  
With your royal purple wing,  
With your jasmine-flowered breath:  
Know the end of you is death!

### THE STRIKER

It was Christmas Eve and I looked at my paint,  
And it sickened my guts—the sight,  
And I went to the Madam and says, “I ain’t  
A goin’ to work tonight.”

And I sneaked to a church where they had a tree,  
And I got me a place to sit,  
And I sung—you’d never have know’d it was me—  
I thought my gullet ’ud split.

Oh, gee I was pullin’ the handsome bluff,  
Pretendin’ that I was grand—  
The ladies they give me a box of stuff,  
And one of ’em squeezed my hand.

But I never come close to a single child,  
For I ain’t that manner of scum,  
But the motherin’ part of my brain went wild  
And I crawled home staggerin’ dumb.

And I rubbed the smear from my achin’ face  
And I cried till I couldn’t see,  
And I swore I’d snatch my woman’s place  
That heaven had meant for me.

“Oh, what’s the use?” says my red, red paint,  
“Of lookin’ a jade-green sight?”  
So I went to work for I guess there ain’t  
Much use in wastin’ a night.

## CITY DUST

### FIFTH AVENUE PHILOSOPHY

If someone comes to dull the light  
When morning suns are streaming,  
And makes things lovely for your sight  
While you lie idly dreaming;  
If someone smoothes your silken hair  
And serves you cake and honey—  
Then why should you reflect or care  
Who furnishes the money?

If you're a lovely, lovely queen  
Beswathed in silk and sables,  
Parading in your limousine  
While humans live in stables;  
If wretched children hurry by—  
As pale as alabaster  
And misery offends your eye—  
Why—drive a little faster!

If George toils long and hard to earn  
Enough to flaunt your banners,  
And then comes home too tired to learn  
The newest parlor manners;  
And if he yawns—the dunder-head—  
Too sleepy for your teaching,  
Why let the poor simp go to bed—  
And you go on *machiching*!

## CITY DUST

### THE GOOD OLD TALES

Those good old tales my mother told—  
*That lies are black and truth is gold!*  
*That he who bides with truth alone,*  
*Shall rule upon a gilded throne!*  
*That truth will crown the humblest head*  
*And rise when all the earth is dead!*

And so when I had sinned, I came  
With all my stricken soul aflame  
And sank before my Love and told  
The TRUTH—because the TRUTH is gold!  
With ink-black tongue and blows of blood  
He thrust me down into the mud!

I rose and wiped my slimy skirt  
And salved the wounds where I was hurt,  
And lifted up my scarlet face  
And held my body straight with grace!  
Unlearned the tales that mother told—  
And straightway found my throne of gold;  
And there I watch poor TRUTH limp by—  
While I—I laugh aloud and lie!

### THE BRAVERY OF LOVE

We wed in the lovely fresh of things  
When the roses blossom red,  
As a challenge athwart the cold gray wings  
Of winter—flapping ahead.

## CITY DUST

### REAL BABIES!

O, a dream-baby smiles in a whimsical way,  
But a real-baby gurgles and screams  
And rollicks about in a lustier play  
Than the babies we know in our dreams.

A dream-baby's breath is as cool as the snow  
And its loving is pale as the moon,  
But a real-baby's breath is like lillies that grow  
In the warm-hearted sweetness of June.

A dream-baby's kiss is a silvery wraith,  
A wan little cloud-crested seal—  
But a real-baby's kisses rekindle our faith  
For a real-baby's kisses are real!

### CHILDREN

Made out of mistletoe, bubbles and holly,  
Guarded with kisses and aching and folly;  
Who could foretell by your dimples and laughter  
The treacherous pain that is bound to come after?  
But wait! In the end you will win for your folly—  
Your own little mistletoe, bubbles and holly!

## CITY DUST

### THE LYRIC OF LIFE

Because the world seemed warped and wrong  
I stayed within to write a song—  
    A rhythmic woodland fancy.  
I wanted men to dance and sing  
With forest freedom, swirl and swing  
    To nature's necromancy.

The hill-sides called my truant mind;  
I turned away and drew the blind  
    Against the sunny flickers.  
But though the gloom hung thick I found  
I could not still the luring sound  
    Of laughing berry-pickers.

And from the bridge there came a shout—  
My boy had duped a speckled trout,  
    His first successful fishing;  
I pressed my eyes to cheat the tears  
But still the outside charmed my ears—  
    I could not stay the wishing.

Then Lassie growled with discontent;  
The summer breeze had blown a scent  
    Of strangers in the Hollow;  
And someone shouted loud my name—  
The echo charmed me; when it came  
    I knew that I must follow.

Great God! To shut out sun and trees  
And then in gloom to sing of these!—  
    My sin was past forgiving.  
Out doors I rushed with bursting heart,  
My song unsung; for art is art  
    But life is more—it's living!

## CITY DUST

### INVOCATION

High noon! Above me rides the run—  
So much to do, so little done.  
I hope that I may always see  
My job and labor honestly;  
And when I've settled every score,  
May moonvines shade my cottage door  
And pansies make the walk so gay  
That little ones will stop to play.  
Some books, the sunlight and the air,  
A crackling hearth, a bite to share.  
Lord give me this and then consign  
A gentle, withered, hand to mine.

### LOVE IS BEST

How fair to stride the world  
With golden medals glinting on thy breast,  
Thy slickened locks with chaplets intercurled—  
But always love is best.

How good to view thy lands  
With swishing wheat and poppy-blooms abreast,  
With reins of power clutched within thy hands—  
But always love is best.

The twain thou shalt not glean,  
(And power is a blunt and boresome guest)  
So gather roses while the heart is clean—  
For always love is best.

## CITY DUST

### THE SONG OF THE GUTTER-SNIPE

I've a garden box of flowers just within my window sill—  
Clustered violets and roses, heliotrope and daffodil,  
And the peacocks strut among them drinking water from  
a spring  
And the tree-tops are a-flutter with the birds that never sing;  
How I love the trailing vines!  
And the pines!  
And the tiny little steeples with the bells that never ring!

And my birds are never hungry and my leaves are never dry  
For my box is made of creton where the roses never die;  
How I rest among the flowers in my dingy room at night  
With my hands on big red roses and my throbbing throat  
drawn tight.  
And the grind is all a blot  
And forgot—  
For it's summer all the winter when my garden is in sight.

Someone told me that the flowers in the country really bloom  
And the birds keep up a chorus just as steady as a loom.  
Oh it must be fairyland I think for any farmer's wife  
With a lot of song birds going like a zither or a fife.  
My! How wonderful it seems  
In my dreams.  
Just like bolts and bolts of creton all rolled out and come  
to life!

## CITY DUST

### THE TENEMENT HOUSE OFFICE

A room slashed through the middle by a railing—  
Behind it stands the agent—fat—crop-gluttled!  
Before it droops the tenant woman, paling—  
“My man—mahsheen! ’es gat hees fingars cutted!”  
Mahsheen! my man! ’es gat hees fingars cutted!”  
“Five days you’ve had by law—tonight you’re going!”  
Next comes a battered thing with good intention;  
She digs into her pocket—footsteps slowing—  
And fetches up her widowed-mother’s-pension—  
Her meagre, little, widowed-mother’s-pension.

A withered lad stands by and shifts his crutches—  
A weary, starved, unhallowed son of sorrow;—  
He drips some silver from his sweaty clutches—  
“My mama says she’ll bring the rest tomorrow—  
She’s got a job—she’ll bring the rest tomorrow.”

Next bangs the door with pride—the brassy strumpet—  
Bepainted, furbelowed, untemperamental;  
Her laugh is like the cracking of a trumpet!  
Just now she laughs for someone pays the rental—  
The very small but dearly purchased, rental!

All day and every day—the railing quivers  
With limpy hands and hands that ache and flutter;—  
With drab humanity that begs and shivers  
For one more night before it feels the gutter—  
The ever-gaping—phantom-crowded gutter!

## CITY DUST

### PENELOPE OF THE TENEMENTS

The noonday bursts upon the Avenue,  
With scrape and scuffle of a million feet;  
Untethered children try their throats anew,  
And angry mothers bawl and babies bleat;  
The dinning motors crash across the granite!  
The cracking whips resound to star and planet!  
The world whirls in a cyclone up the street!  
Within the shadow of a narrow door  
Where garbage buckets slattern in a row;  
Where starving cats lie limply on the floor,  
And stranded chicken feathers twirl and blow—  
A woman stands, forever waiting—waiting,  
Like some encloistered sister at a grating,  
Too slack of will to slip the bolts and go.  
The corner butcher comes outside and smiles,  
But angrily, she swerves the other way,  
The Yiddish tailor—furbisher of styles,  
Grins by and bids her haughtiness good-day;  
The grocery merchant nods in loves delusion,  
The ribbon clerk looks up in red confusion—  
And still she has no single word to say.  
The good old mother, worships with the rest;—  
She slips a sturdy chair up close and then  
Goes whispering about the wonder West,  
Where vagrant husbands change to noblemen.  
Her offspring wearied out by stale invention,  
Waves back the words with pompous inattention,  
And turns upon the Avenue again.  
Penelope, go choose another mate!  
Put on the ribboned dress that you forswore!  
No eye stays bright—no lip stays roseate!  
Choose now before they shun the shadowed door!  
In Vagabondia, bread is full of savor!  
Home lights are good but unknown lights are braver—  
Odysseus will come to you no more!

## CITY DUST

### THE ORACLE

Yes crown your women—keep them sweet  
In perfumed gauze from head to feet;  
And fill their palms with precious toys  
And plan for them, swift, subtle joys;

And give them babies on their knees  
And golden coins to waste on these;  
And buy them wonder-blooms to wear  
And carven combs to gird their hair;

And turquoise lakes with slender boats—  
Then press your kisses on their throats;  
Make all the stars their diadem—  
But never tell the truth to them!

### WHEREFORE?

Out of a youthful yonder,  
Into the every day,  
They met for an hour's wonder  
And each one turned away;

And each with another nested,  
And Love with a weary sigh,  
Stumbled within and rested—  
There is no reason why.

## CITY DUST

### THE WIDOWED MOTHER

Oh, listen! listen! God above me please!  
I'm asking only for a little thing—  
To keep my babies close about my knees  
And hear their shouts and laughter echoing.  
I sew until my eyes are turned to stone,  
And starve myself until my lips are blue,  
My finger-tips are bruised down to the bone—  
Oh, God, what can I do?

I've pawned the locket and the dear, worn ring,  
And stumbled through the dark to save the light—  
I've sold my bed for what old iron would bring,  
And gathered firewood like a ghost at night.  
And yet tomorrow morning we must go!  
Go? But go where? Oh if I only knew!  
And winter nearly here with wind and snow!  
Dear God, what can I do?

There's nothing in this world like motherhood—  
The agony of love that drives you wild!  
The choking rush of joy! The Lord is good—  
There's nothing pulls your heartstrings like a child.  
Look at them smiling—dreaming there in bed!  
The moonlight all on purpose comes to shine  
Just like a halo round about each head!  
Thank God they're mine! They're mine!

They're mine until the daylight comes once more,  
And then they'll not be mine—ah but it hurts!  
All gone the little skips across the floor!  
All gone the little hands that tug my skirts!  
And then whose arms will fold them after play?  
Who'll know to guide them straight and love them too?  
It's dawn! Across the moonlight comes the day—  
My God! What can I do?

## CITY DUST

HALLOO!

Up and down the earth!  
Past the wild roses,  
Past the golden-rod,  
Past the burnt Autumn boughs,  
To the snow-drifts.  
Wild roses are youth and love and pain;  
The golden-rod swaggers with wounded bravery;  
Autumn boughs burn with passionate regret;  
The snow-drifts melt;  
Death.  
Up and down the earth go all the people;  
In the Spring—another robin!

## THE HARVESTER

All day, one day, I slaved away  
With my fillet of silken floss;  
The stitches twinkled like glints on the bay  
But I hated the work that I wrought that day—  
So the hours were shameless loss!

All day, one day, I dozed and dreamed  
To the lyric of falling rain,  
I laughed with the drops as they spilt and gleamed—  
I raced with the scud as it whisked and creamed—  
And these hours were golden gain!

## CITY DUST

### CHRISTMAS NIGHT

The city roofs are wedding-caked with snow.  
Down from the moon tumbles a lavender-gray light  
Like the chiffon veils of second mourning.  
I hurry through the gauzy night high up to my little nest  
On the sky-light floor of a great horse-shoe building of brick  
and granite.

The front wings are costly and face the street.  
I am cheap and face the heavens.  
I can see the great middle that bellies back into the alley-way.  
Each little nest with a tiny little parlor,  
Each little parlor with a tiny little tree.  
Bobbing on the branches, glass birds—red, blue, green, purple,  
With electric lights in their insides.  
Tinsel, popcorn, ropes of candy.  
Down in the court by the side of the fountain  
The little german band,

“O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, wie gruen sind deine  
Blaetter!

Du gruenst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit,

Im Winter auch, wenn's friert und schneit,

O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum. Wie gruen sind deine  
Blaetter!”

Fairy children flitting in the shadows dance to the music.  
Windows fly up and paper-wrapped pennies pitch out to the  
court-yard.

The cornettist stops in the middle of a measure  
To scrape in the snow for the money.

Windows bang!—The band moves on.

From the next court—unclear—

“Here we come a-wassailing  
Among the leaves so green,  
Here we come a-wandering,  
So fair to be seen.

## CITY DUST

Love and joy come to you,  
And to you your wassail too,  
And God bless you, and send you  
A happy new year.

And God send you a happy new year."

I know there are more pennies.

I hear the false notes, the unreasoning stops. Silence.

Far off the valiant music of the little german band.

Shadows disappear from the windows.

The lights go out in their insides—the little glass birds—red,  
blue, green, purple. They grow so cold.

Down on the roofs wedding-caked with snow

Tumbles the lavender-gray light from the moon.

From the melting icicles—drip—drip—drip on my sky-light.

Christmas night with the lavender-gray light tumbling down  
from the moon

Like the chiffon veils of second mourning.

Christmas night

Loneliness in my heart and

Silence.

## CITY DUST

### "NIGGER TILLY"

The best cook  
And the slickest thief  
In the state of Texas,  
She would have stolen the golden candle-sticks  
From the very throne of God,  
To light the way for one she loved—  
And she loved me.  
That was Tilly's code.

Generous, insane, romantic,  
An ape even to copying the jerking limp of her mistress,  
A slave where she loved,  
A viper where she hated—  
That was Tilly's character.

An ashy face greased with bacon rind,  
A ragged scar on her left cheek—  
From lip to ear,  
Where  
One raging Othello  
Had nearly loved her to death.  
Fat breasts, uncorseted,  
That hammocked my head to sleep.  
Long gorilla arms that reached me  
No matter where I hid.  
A heart so big it made me wonder  
That one skin could house so much of goodness—  
That was Tilly!

A dead shot with a rock—  
I have seen her toss a pebble  
And end the merry-making of a fly;  
I have seen her hurl a stone  
And pick off my neighbor's fan-tail pigeon. . . .

## CITY DUST

### TILLY'S APOLOGY

*"I's down-right bad, Miss Rosie,  
But the good Gawd know'd I'd be,  
When he gone squanderin' pashion  
Like he done done in me!*

### ON THE DEATH OF THE FAMILY HORSE

"Pore old Clebeland—  
Dar he lay,  
An' his sperret ain't to trubble  
Till de jedgement day,  
But he carcass guine be meltin'  
Widout no hope—  
Into yaller wropped packages  
Of soap, soap, soap!

She raised us all  
Then hung about without any usefulness,  
A dark expected spot on the landscape,  
Something with its roots driven deep into the memory of things—  
Ignored  
Like a weather-beaten hitching-post,  
After the family is driving a six-cylinder.  
One day there was a new look in her eye—  
The white shot with red,  
The black stretched and greedy.  
She threaded the handle of her dish pan with a ribband  
And marching 'round and 'round the house  
Thundered upon the tin with an iron bar  
Chanting:—

*"My poker am my fife,  
An' my pan am my drum;  
Gawd dam de niggers—  
An' a BUM! BUM!! BUM!!!*

## CITY DUST

They came—those officers—  
And chased Nigger Tilly;  
Ten million years back she went,  
Clawing her way up into an acorn tree,  
And there on a branch she chittered and jibbered,

*“My poker am my fife,  
An’ my pan am my drum;  
Gawd damn de niggers—  
An’ a BUM! BUM!! BUM!!!”*

Down she fell  
And lumped  
Like the sack of carrots in the cellar.  
They shoved her onto a board and hurried away.  
All that mangled goodness still murmuring—

*“My poker am my fife,  
An’ my pan am my drum;  
Gawd damn de niggers—  
An’ a BUM!!—bum!—bu—”*

## FORSAKEN

The moonvines trail from the window-sill,  
The poppies flame from the stalk,  
The mignonette and the daffodil  
Are nodding along the walk.

The shades are high on the crystal pane  
And the sun comes revelling through,  
To make me young and happy again  
As loving him used to do.

And the people pass and the people grin  
For my love has wandered away—  
Away from me and the warm within,  
Out where the world is gay.

## CITY DUST

And the kettle bubbles as merrily  
And the logs flame even as red,  
But my love has wandered away from me—  
And the soul of my house is dead.

## CONSECRATION

And better than all the furious blast  
Where the white-hot passions ride,  
Is the silvery silence that comes at last  
When the soul is satisfied.

## YOUTHFULNESS PLEADS

Oh, fill my arms with daffodils,  
And wreathe my soul in dreams,  
And build me lacey palaces, oh, men!  
And let me find the wonder-world as lovely as it seems—  
For I never can be beautiful again!

There's time enough for charity,  
For spectacles and books,  
There's time to drip my heart's blood from my pen,  
There's time for bitter bickering and bitter, bitter looks—  
But I never can be beautiful again!

So hide your puling imbeciles,  
Your old and sick and vile,  
And keep the fear of age beyond my ken,  
For youth is full of loveliness, a very little while—  
And I never can be beautiful again!

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